



CITES Conferences of the Parties

The Process for Becoming an Observer

What is CITES, and How is it Administered?

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is an international treaty aimed at regulating the international trade in endangered species. CITES was put into effect July 1, 1975, with the United States one of the original 10 Party countries. Today, 146 countries are Parties to CITES.

CITES, administered through the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. The original documents are held there, with texts in five languages: Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. English, French, and Spanish are the official working languages of CITES.

CITES is one of the few conservation treaties with a permanent Secretariat. The Secretariat provides Party countries with trade information and technical support, interfaces among Parties, contracts trade studies, informs governments and the public about CITES wildlife trade developments, and organizes meetings of the Conference of the

Parties. The Secretariat also investigates possible CITES violations and trade threats to wildlife.

When are Conferences Held?

The CITES Parties meet every 2 to 2½ years at a Conference of the Parties (COP). During this 2-week long meeting, they review and vote on proposed resolutions and decisions to improve how CITES works, review and vote on proposed amendments to the listings of CITES protected species, and resolve policy issues.

Each COP is hosted by a different Party country. The United States hosted the plenipotentiary meeting when the CITES treaty first was signed, and COP9 in 1994. Attending each COP are delegations of the Party countries, representatives of the CITES Secretariat and UNEP, and representatives of approved national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), who attend as observers.

What is the Role of Observers?

Observers at a COP may attend all plenary and committee sessions, and comment in these sessions on any of the



issues. However, they are not permitted to vote on proposals. The U.S. Government's delegation provides daily briefings at each COP for U.S. observers (both national and international NGOs based in the United States).

How Do I Apply for Observer Status?

Article XI, Paragraph 7, of CITES outlines the technical qualifications necessary to attend a COP as an observer. CITES requires an NGO to be technically qualified in protection, conservation, or management of wild fauna and flora. An NGO applying for observer status should provide materials with its application that detail how it meets these technical requirements. It should also include copies of its charter and bylaws, as well as a list of representatives it intends to send to the COP. Individuals that are not affiliated with an NGO do not qualify for approval as observers.

An NGO may apply for observer status in one of the following ways:

1. International NGOs with offices in more than one country should apply to the CITES Secretariat at the following address:

CITES Secretariat
15, chemin des Anémones
CH-1219 CHATELAINE-Genève
Switzerland
tel: (4122) 9178139
fax: (4122) 7973417
E-mail: cites@unep.ch

2. NGOs based in a country other than the United States should apply to the CITES Management Authority of that country.

3. NGOs based in the United States should apply to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), Office of Management Authority (OMA), at the address shown on this fact sheet or e-mail the request to r9oma_cites@fws.gov

How Long Before Observer Status is approved?

The Secretariat's heavy logistical workload preparing for a COP—including its preparation of observer registration forms—means that applications for

observer status usually are not approved more than 4 or 5 months before a COP.

However United States-based NGOs can expect that once OMA receives their application, it will be reviewed and processed, and the NGO promptly notified of the Service's decision.

Any NGO that has attended a previous COP, and is applying to OMA for observer status needs to do only the following: 1) send OMA a letter requesting observer status, and 2) provide a list of representatives it intends to send to the COP. Since its technical qualifications have been previously reviewed by the Service, the NGO may expect approval of its observer status to be automatic in most cases.

How Will I Know?

Once the Service approves an NGO, the NGO will receive a formal approval letter. Enclosed with this letter will be:

1) a COP registration form (copies of which OMA receives from the Secretariat 4 to 5 months prior to the COP);

2) a hotel booking form; and 3) other information regarding attendance. The NGO must fill out the registration form and submit it, along with a copy of OMA's approval letter, to the CITES Secretariat. The Secretariat's deadline for observer registration is one month prior to the opening of the COP.

The Secretariat charges each approved observer a registration fee, which may vary from COP to COP (the registration fee for COP10 was set at a minimum of \$600 for the initial NGO representative and a minimum of \$300 for each additional representative). The registration fee includes one set of all necessary COP documents. The Secretariat usually accepts the registration fee either by check to the CITES Secretariat or at the time of registration at the COP. For any given COP, the NGO observer should consult with the Secretariat about paying the registration fee.

Each observer approved by the Service will be added automatically to OMA's mailing list and, on a periodic basis, receive the latest CITES-related information leading up to the COP.

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